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NEWS FOCUS: INTELLIGENCE FAILURE IN IRAN

+BY CORD MEYER2

WASHINGTON -- IN THIS SAVAGELY COMPETITIVE TOWN, FOREIGN POLICY OFFICIALS HAVE OFTEN MADE THE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES THE SCAPEGOATS FOR THEIR OWN MISTAKES OF JUDGMENT. BUT IN THE CASE OF IRAN, THE INTELLIGENCE WAS ERRONEOUS.

THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE HAS A HOT POTATO ON ITS HANDS IN THE FORM OF A HIGHLY INACCURATE CIA ASSESSMENT OF THE POSITION OF THE SHAH SUBMITTED TO THE WHITE HOUSE IN MID-AUGUST. WHEN CONGRESS CONVENES, THE COMMITTEE WILL HAVE TO DECIDE HOW FAR TO PUSH THE INQUIRY INTO ADM. STANSFIELD TURNER'S PERFORMANCE AS CIA DIRECTOR AND WHAT REMEDIAL ACTION TO RECOMMEND.

THE CIA ASSESSMENT WAS SO FAR OFF THE MARK THAT PRESIDENT CARTER IS DEEPLY CONCERNED BY THIS FAILURE TO COMPREHEND A SITUATION CRITICAL TO AMERICAN SECURITY. OFFICIALS WHO HAVE SEEN THE DOCUMENT DESCRIBE IT AS "180 DEGREES WRONG" IN ITS UNDERESTIMATION OF THE GROWING POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION AND IN ITS BLAND REASSURANCE THAT THE SHAH DID NOT FACE EVEN A SERIOUS CRISIS, MUCH LESS THE MAJOR REVOLT THAT HAS OCCURRED.

THE AGENCY WAS NOT ALONE IN ITS IGNORANCE OF THE FORCES BOILING BENEATH THE SURFACE GLITTER OF IRANIAN SOCIETY. THE U.S. AMBASSADOR, WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN, DOES NOT LIKE TO BE REMINDED OF HIS PUBLIC ASSURANCE SIX MONTHS AGO THAT THE SPREADING RIOTS WERE NOT A CAUSE OF MAJOR CONCERN. THE STATE DEPARTMENT SHARED WITH THE CIA AN UNINFORMED OPTIMISM AND WAS AS ISOLATED AS THE SHAH HIMSELF FROM THE REALITIES.

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